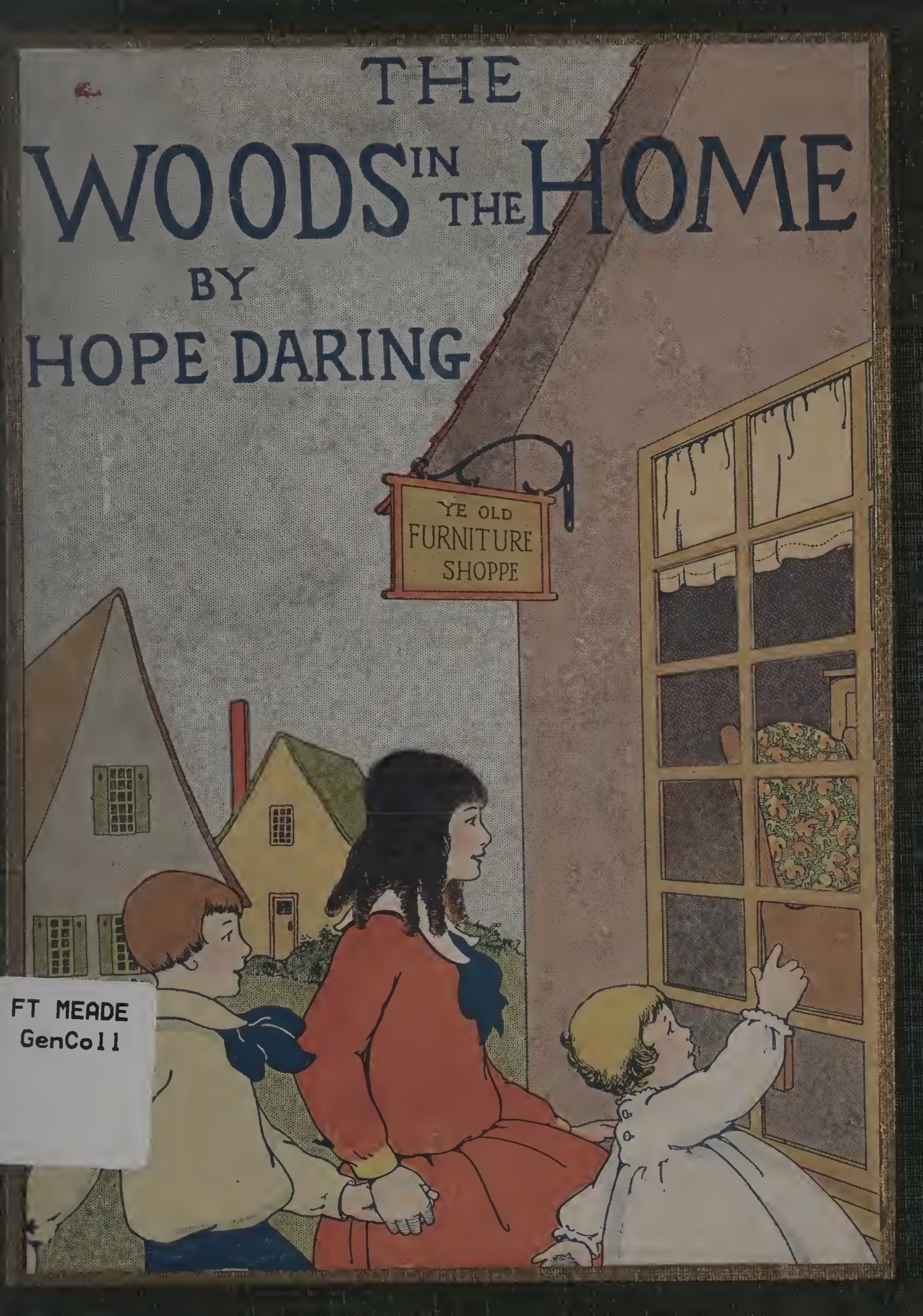
THE WOODS IN THE HOME

BY

HOPE DARING



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The Woods In The Home

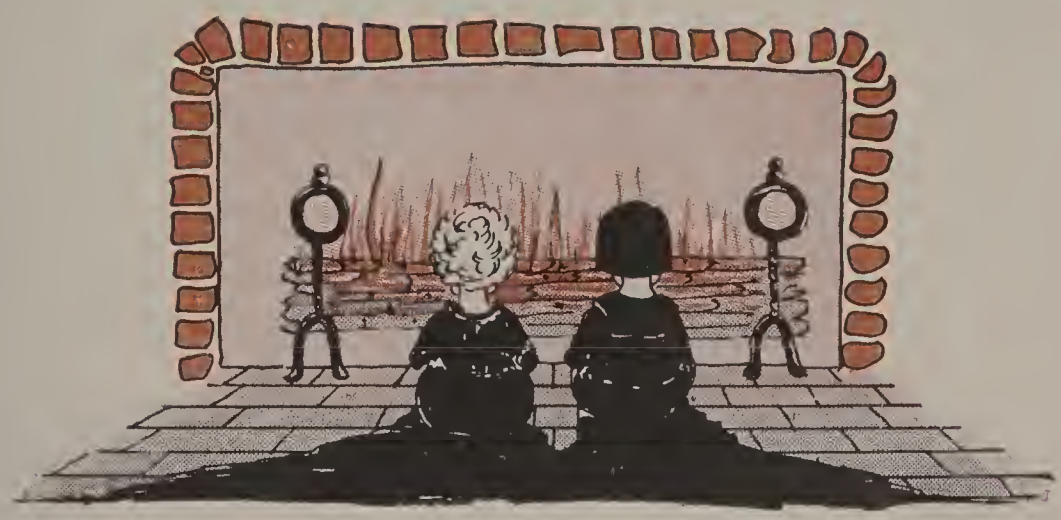
In Japan the cherry is raised extensively, and the blossoming time is one of general rejoicing.

THE WOODS IN THE HOME

BY

HOPE DARING =pseud.=

=Johnson, Anna=



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Contents

I. VELMA AND THE OAK 7

II. THE OLD WALNUT SIDEBOARD 21

III. THE STORY OF MAHOGANY 27

IV. THE WHITE PINE TABLE 37

V. A CHERRY CHAT 47

VI. THE TALE OF THE EBONY WRITING DESK 56

VII. WHAT VELMA LEARNED OF THE MAPLE 64

VIII. A PLEASANT LUNCH WITH THE ASH TABLE . . . 73

IX. THE CHESTNUT AS FOOD AND AS FURNITURE . . . 82

X. A BIRTHDAY TREAT AND BIRCH'S TALE 91

XI. SIGNOR MALCHI'S VISITOR AND THE ROSEWOOD BOX . 100

XII. THE BAMBOO CABINET 109

Velma was a little girl, nine years old.

The Furniture People

CHAPTER I

VELMA AND THE OAK

Velma was a little girl nine years old. Her home was in a tenement house which stood on the bank of a river. The great city had grown somewhat away from River Street, and the quaint, three-story houses were occupied by a strange medley of persons.

Velma and her widowed mother occupied three small rooms on the first floor. These rooms were in the back part of the building and overlooked the river.

Across the hall from them and also in the rear of the building, lived Signor Malchi, an old Italian gentleman. He repaired, bought, and sold furniture. His rooms were crowded with curious tables, chairs, cabinets, desks, and other articles. Often carriages stopped in the narrow

street, and ladies in silken robes swept through the hall to Signor Malchi's rooms.

The Italian was a kindly old man with a wrinkled face and flashing black eyes. From one of his rooms a balcony jutted out over the river. There Signor Malchi had great boxes of plants growing. Trailing green vines allowed the sunbeams to play hide and seek with the sturdy red geraniums and the delicately-tinted tea roses. One could look up, through the vines, to the smiling blue sky, and there was nothing to obstruct the view up the river.

Velma and Signor Malchi were great friends. He allowed her to play in his rooms and on the balcony. The little girl passed many happy hours among the plants. Then she enjoyed talking to the old man, examining the pieces of quaint furniture, and "wondering" about them.

That was something of which Velma did a great deal—wondering. Now this does not mean that she asked many questions. She thought much of the things that came under her observation, making for them, in her own mind, a life that was almost as real to her as her own. Velma was a very imaginative child. Both her mother and Signor Malchi patiently answered

the questions she asked and taught her many things.

When the long summer vacation came there was no country life for Velma. She lived a long distance from any park, and the little girl's mother would not allow her to play on the street. So it came about that she spent many hours in the furniture rooms and on the adjoining balcony. Her mother resolved that, even if her little daughter was shut out from the beauties of the country through the long summer days, she should learn of some of the wonderful things that God has created.

Thus Velma became acquainted with the furniture people. They told her charming stories, showed her beautiful pictures, and sang her sweet songs.

Now I must admit that to the eye of a prosaic, commonplace person these people were only tables, chairs, and like articles. To the ear of the same person, the stories told were only the results of what the little girl was taught by her mother and Signor Malchi.

Instead of being commonplace and prosaic, however, Velma was what the world calls imaginative; some persons will say that she was a dreamer. Many other little folk are like her,

and to the boys and girls who imagine and dream, these stories of the furniture people are told.

Early one morning, Velma entered the chief room of Signor Malchi. Her dark brown hair was neatly brushed and curled, while her brown eyes sparkled with joy.

"Oh, the world is beautiful, beautiful!" she said aloud as she stood in the doorway which led to the balcony. "I wonder how the green fields that mother tells about look in this bright sunlight."

"I can tell you that, Velma," said a mellow voice. "For fourscore years I stood upon a hill overlooking sloping fields, which were covered with green grass or waving golden grain."

"How delightful! But I —— Oh, it is you, Mr. Settle, is it?"

"Yes. I am a settle now and a valuable one. Just look at my carving, Velma. It was done long years ago; so you see that I am old. While I am Mr. Settle now, I am also Oak, one of the best-known of the furniture people. I like that name best, little girl. You see men made me into a settle, but God made me an oak tree."

Velma looked thoughtful.

"I like to hear you say that. It sounds—well, like the music of the great organ at the church. You are a beautiful settle, though."

The settle was a long seat with a high back and arms. The oak was dark and had been highly polished, but was now dusty. Upon the panels into which the back was divided, curious designs were carved. These were surmounted by an open-work design.

The child ran her fingers lightly over the back of the settle.

"What a long, long time you have lived, dear old Oak!"

"Yes, many years; but, before I tell you of myself, you must hear something of my family."

Velma snuggled up into one corner of the settle where she could enjoy the cool breeze from the open door. Then the voice again began to speak.

"The oak belongs to the genus *Quercus*. There are about three hundred different species. Some are mere shrubs, but the greater number are lofty trees. We attain a height of from fifty to one hundred feet. Indeed, oak trees have been known which were one hundred and fifty feet high."

Velma drew a long breath.

"There are so many, many of you, and you seem so big!"

"Do not be discouraged. Will you feel more at home if I limit the number to those growing in our own country? The United States produces about twenty-five varieties. It is said that, before the forests were cleared away, six or eight kinds could be found growing in every locality. I am White Oak, or *Quercus Alba*. Suppose I tell you of my particular life instead of the family generally."

"I am sure I would like that better."

"I do not remember when I was an acorn, so shall leave the description of the fruit of the oak tree until I can tell you of that produced by myself. What is it, Velma?"

The little girl had raised her head, a puzzled look upon her face.

"You said fruit. And ——"

"I meant neither an apple nor an orange. There, child, I am not laughing at you. I said fruit, for oak trees do bear fruit, although it is not usually called by that name. I will explain later. My first recollection is of peeping up through the moist earth one sunny spring morning. I was only a slender reddish stem, two scaly leaves, and, below ground, a tiny root.

However, I stretched up and up, green leaves growing along my slim stalk. I was very happy that first year, and all too soon winter came."

"What did you do then?" Velma asked. "You had no warm house."

"Dame Nature had already taught me how to drop my leaves and prepare for winter. Many summers and winters passed before I stretched my head up where I could look over my neighbors and see the undulating fields spread out below me. The birds built nests in my branches, and the winds alternately sang sweet lullabies to me and hurled me about that my roots might strike deeper into the earth. Let me tell you how I looked when I was full grown."

Velma held her breath to listen, at the same time resting one cheek against the settle's arm.

"My bark was ash colored and marked with irregular flakes. My leaves grew on short stems, called petioles. They were notched, having three or four segments, as the divisions are called, on each side. They were straight-veined leaves, which means that the veins or ribs extended straight through the blade of the leaf. Thousands and thousands of these leaves covered my branches, making a great mass of

greenness. Now I must tell you of my blossoms and fruit."

Those words puzzled Velma. She had seen oak trees growing in the park and was sure that they had neither blossoms nor fruit.

"White Oaks bear two kinds of flowers. There are long, slender clusters hanging from the branches and much resembling catkins. They are called staminate flowers. I will stop to tell you something of the great law of nature that governs all blossoms. Please listen carefully, as a perfect comprehension of this will help you to understand about other trees; for, Velma, all trees have flowers."

The little girl sat up very straight, an eager look upon her face.

"A complete flower has four parts. These are the calyx or outside part of the blossom which often consists of five green sepals covered with down; the corolla or bright colored petals; the stamens—tiny, thread-like filaments with a powder box called an anther at the top of each one; and the pistil. The lower part of this last is a seed case and is called an ovary. The top of the pistil is round and is called the stigma. Now Velma, see if you can name the four parts of a complete flower."

Velma had been so attentive that she was able to repeat promptly, "Calyx, corolla, stamens, and pistil."

"Very good. Now in the ovary, which you will remember lies at the base of the pistil, may be found ovules—wee specks which may one day become seeds. I say 'may,' for they must have aid from a force without. Do you remember what I said about the anthers?"

"Oh yes. You called them powder boxes and said that they were at the top of the stamens."

"I see you are trying to learn. Well, the anthers are filled with fine, dust-like grains. This powder is called pollen, and it is necessary for the pollen to reach the ovules in order that they may become real seeds and be able to produce living plants."

Velma leaned nearer.

"That is a lot to learn, but I—don't—just ——"

"See what it has to do with me," Oak finished gayly. "It does have a good deal to do with me, as you will see before we finish. Sometimes the grains of pollen fall against the pistil, or are borne to it by the wind, or are carried to it by honey-seeking bees. You will

remember that I told you the oak tree has two kinds of blossoms. Neither one can be called perfect, for in one are the stamens and in the other the pistil. The pollen is produced in the long staminate flowers which I have already described. The pistillate flowers look like very small pink knobs. Examine one closely, and you will find a shallow cup containing wee points. Upon this the pollen falls, and the pistillate flower grows. The cup is retained as a setting for the acorn."

"Acorn! Oh, I see!"

"Yes, Velma, the acorn is the oak's fruit, and from it may grow another tree."

"I thought an acorn was a nut."

The sound that followed that remark of Velma's was much like a chuckle. She felt that Oak was laughing at her, but he said:

"When you go home look in the great dictionary that used to be your father's and see what it says about a nut. But I must hasten. Oaks have long been admired and respected by men. The ancient Greeks venerated my ancestors, claiming that their great god Zeus (the Jupiter of the Romans) was born beneath an oak tree. One which grew at Dodona was sacred to him, and, when the leaves rustled, the

Greeks said that he had a message for the priests who lived near. These poetical Greeks also believed in Dryads or maidens who lived in trees, and they claimed that my relatives were the favorite abodes of these beautiful creatures."

"I know a little about those strange old myths. Mother has told me some of them."

"The Romans looked upon the oak tree as a symbol of power. To gain 'a crown of oak' was considered a great honor. It was given only to one who was a Roman citizen and who had either 'slain an enemy, saved the life of a Roman, or reconquered a field of battle.' The Jews venerated the oak, and it is mentioned several times in the Bible. The nurse of Rebekah was buried under an oak. In Ezekiel we read that in the shadow of this tree altars had been erected to idols."

"I should think you could not help being a little proud," Velma said. "Your family is so well known."

"If I am proud of anything, it is because we have always been noted for our strength and stability. In England two thousand years ago, the oak was held to be sacred, and the Druids —then the priests of that land—conducted their religious ceremonies in oak groves. Centuries

later the Saxons valued the oak forests of England for their acorns."

"What could they do with them? I thought that they were good only to grow into trees and for squirrels to eat."

"The Saxons had great herds of swine. These were fattened upon the acorns which were then called mast. The right to let hogs feed in a forest was valuable and was bought and sold like other property. Sometimes churches were endowed with this right of pannage, as it was known, or it formed a part of the dowry of a king's daughter."

"Oh, how many, many things there are in the world to learn!" Velma cried.

"You are right. There are many good times ahead of you, for there is much pleasure in acquiring knowledge. History will teach you many charming stories about my cousins."

"Tell me some of them, please."

"I have time to mention only a few. There is the story of the hollow oak in which tradition says William Wallace slept, and the Royal Oak in whose branches King Charles II took refuge from his pursuers. In our own land you will find the Charter Oak of Connecticut. It is claimed that the charter of the State was hidden in a

hollow within this tree during a time of trouble."

"Is that all?" Velma asked as the voice ceased.

"All! Why child, books could be written about us! I have not said a word about the characteristics of my cousins or the various tints our leaves acquire in autumn. My own leaves turn to a rich purple, while those of Red Oak are a brilliant crimson or an orange-red. Live Oak's leaves are not deciduous, which means that they do not fall in autumn, the tree being an evergreen. Ah, we are truly a noble family. Even the poets have sung of us."

"What do they say?"

"Keats noted our dignity and power. He called us

"'Those green-robed senators of mighty woods;'

while Cowper sang of some of my ancestors,

"'Lords of the woods, the long-surviving oaks.'"

"You have always been happy, have you not?"

There was a moment's pause before Oak said, "Velma, into all lives come dark days. After scores of years of a merry, outdoor existence, it

was not easy for me to understand that the blows that hurled my proud length to the earth and the terrible sawing, planing, and polishing were a part of God's plan for me. I saw it, though, in the years when I, a carefully-made settle, stood at the side of a fireplace in the hall of a colonial home. Yes, I have been happy, Velma, as are those who trust God for all things."

These poetical Greeks also believed in Dryads or maidens who lived in trees.

The sideboard was tall and wide.

CHAPTER II

THE OLD WALNUT SIDEBOARD

One afternoon, Velma went into the furniture room and found Signor Malchi absent. As she was about to go to the balcony, she noticed a large piece of furniture which she had never seen before.

"I remember that I saw the dray drive up here this morning; it must have brought this, for yesterday the Signor went to a sale. What an enormous cupboard it is!"

"Not a cupboard, Velma, if you please. I am a sideboard." The voice was somewhat sad. "For fifty years I stood in a long and lofty dining-room on Gray Street, proudly bearing my burden of family silver and fragile china. Now my master and mistress are both gone, and I am obliged to go out into the world, seeking another home."

"I am sure you will easily find one," the little girl said. "You are beautiful."

The sideboard was tall and wide. The wood was a dark and glistening brown. Across both

doors of the lower part, a grape-vine had been carved in high relief. Above the wide top were several curiously-shaped little brackets, and in the back a small mirror was set in a massive frame. The handles to the doors and drawers were bunches of grapes, carved from the wood.

"What are you, please?" Velma asked.

It seemed to her that the old sideboard stood a little straighter as it replied:

"I am *Juglans Nigra.*"

Unconsciously Velma made a little bow.

"I am glad to see you, but I never heard of you before," she replied.

"I think you have. Common people call me Black Walnut. The *Juglans* are a most distinguished family. Indeed, my English cousin takes the title *Juglans Regia*, or Royal Walnut."

Velma sat down upon a roll of matting that lay near, folding her hands in her lap.

"One thing I have learned," she remarked; "with you furniture people your family name comes first instead of, as with us, last. Will you not commence at the beginning and tell me all about yourself? And do you mind if I call you Black Walnut instead of that other name?"

"No, I shall not mind." The voice was more cordial. "The beginning, did you say?

I was at the beginning when I gave you our family name. We are not as plentiful as some families, nor do we have as many divisions, but our rareness has made us more valuable. There are about thirty species of our family, some of which grow in the Old World. I am an American tree."

"Oh, I am glad of that!" Velma cried, and the surface of the sideboard brightened, as if blushing with pleasure.

"I see you are a patriotic little girl as well as an appreciative one. I am found in many parts of the United States and attain a great size. Indeed, some members of my family have a trunk five or six feet in diameter. My leaves are pinnated ones. Do you know what that term means?"

Velma shook her head.

"The word pinnate means having the form of a feather. In botany, however, it has come to be applied to the arrangement of what is called a compound leaf. My small, pointed leaves are closely joined to the opposite sides of a stem or petiole. This arrangement taken together is called a compound leaf of which the individual leaves are known as leaflets. Now, as my petioles are slender, they move with the slightest

breeze. When I hold up my swaying, umbrella-like top to the summer sunlight, I am a fine sight."

"Do you bear flowers and fruit?" Velma asked.

"Of course, I do. If I failed to do so, I should not be a perfect tree. My flowers resemble in arrangement those of White Oak. There are the same tail-like catkins, each containing thirty or forty little pockets or anthers filled with the gold dust you have learned to call pollen. They do not grow from the tip of the branches but back further and are green in color."

"Do you have another kind of flowers?"

"Yes, the pistillate ones, although they do not look much like what you usually call flowers. These grow in terminal clusters. I see you are scowling again, so I will stop to explain. You know what a cluster is. A terminal leaf, bud, or flower is one borne at the end or summit of a branch. Each one of my pistillate flowers has a single ovule, and there is a curious little frill at the top. When the pollen falls upon the ovule it begins to grow. All summer long it slowly increases in size, swinging safely on its branch home. When autumn comes, it has attained its full size and is a black walnut."

Velma was too much interested even to ask a question. After pausing a moment, Black Walnut went on.

"My fruit is globular in shape. It is surrounded by a green, fleshy husk which soon decays. Within is a nut with a dark-colored, rough shell and a palatable kernel."

"Last Christmas I had what Cousin Edith called English walnuts. Were they the nuts you are talking about?"

"No, they belonged to the cousin of whom I told you, *Juglans Regia*. The nut is more highly esteemed than mine, but the wood is not so fine. There is little difference in our trees. The nut of my English cousin is ellipsoidal in shape."

"Oh! oh!" Velma cried. "I don't know what that big word means."

"Why, that's very easy. In botany it means a nut, seed vessel, or other organ that is long, oval, and regularly rounded at both ends. The English walnut is light-colored and has a thin shell. In England it is always called simply the walnut without any prefix. The Romans knew and prized the walnut. They called it Jove's nut, and from that name came our family one of *Juglans*, the old word *glans* signifying a nut."

"Mother often tells me of the good times she had when she was a girl. Her home was on a farm. In the winter evenings they used to sit round a great fire in the old stone fireplace, telling stories, and cracking butternuts."

"Now, Velma, Butternut is my own cousin. His proper name is *Juglans Cinera* or White Walnut. The tree grows about fifty feet high and is seldom more than a foot in diameter. Its compound leaf is shorter than mine and consists of from nine to seventeen leaflets. The nut is oblong and has a sharp point at the top. White Walnut is one of the furniture people. His wood is of a peculiar dark reddish tint. It is highly esteemed, often being used for the inside woodwork of fine homes."

Here Black Walnut was interrupted in his recital by Velma's mother calling her to come to supper.

CHAPTER III

THE STORY OF MAHOGANY

"VELMA, little girl, come see what I have to show you."

It was the voice of Signor Malchi. Velma was running through the hall, but she stopped quickly when she heard the kind old Italian's voice.

"This it is—one rare old table. The man from whom I did just buy it, he said it once did belong to the great Napoleon."

"Napoleon! Do you suppose it did, Signor? And how did it come here?"

The old man laughed.

"I think it can hardly be so. But Velma, without a doubt it is very old. See, the fine markings of the wood!"

Velma looked closely at the table. It was not large, the plain top being three feet square. There were four slender legs, each terminating in a curious, claw-shaped foot. After noticing these things, the little girl looked at the wood.

It was of fine grain, in color a dark reddish brown, curiously marked with varying shades of the same color, and was highly polished.

"Who is it?" Velma asked, meaning the furniture person of whom she hoped to hear, rather than the table. That was why she used the pronoun "who" instead of "what."

Signor Malchi had turned away to greet a customer. So it did not surprise Velma when a strange voice, a sweet, clear one, replied to her question.

"I am Mahogany, Velma. My botanical name is *Swietenia Mahogoni*. My family is American, but we grow only in tropical regions. I and my immediate relatives are found in Central America, the West Indies, and Mexico. There is also a so-called mahogany tree in Africa and another in Australia, but they are not really members of my family. I came from Central America."

"Did you truly come from that far-off land?" Velma cried, her eyes sparkling with delight. "I am sure you must have many beautiful things to tell me. Are you very old?"

"Why, you may think I am. It is nearly one hundred years since I was fashioned into this table. For more than two hundred years before

that I grew under the deep blue sky of Honduras."

"Three hundred years!" There was a note of reverence in the child's voice, and with one hand she gently stroked the table's glossy surface. "It—it is wonderful."

"The ways of the Lord God, the Creator of all things, are past finding out. Before I begin to tell you of myself personally, let me give you a brief account of the divisions of our family. In commercial circles the mahogany that grows in Central America is Honduras mahogany, that from Mexico is called Mexican, and that from the West Indies goes by the name of Spanish. Then there is a division into classes based on the appearance of the wood. I am of the kind called the festooned, for, as you will see, my shaded marking has the appearance of festoons or wreaths."

"I see. What are the other kinds?"

"There is the bird's eye, which has little oval figures of a different shade from the background; the caterpillar, marked by indistinct white lines; and the watered. This last is crossed by wave-like white lines."

"Do the trees of these different kinds look alike?"

"Very much so. I will describe a tree to you. Then I want to tell you something about the method of cutting and shipping the timber, also a bit of my history. I want you to hear enough of this last to let you know how mahogany came to be one of the furniture people."

Velma sat down in a chair, moving it near enough to the table to rest her arm on the polished top.

"The mahogany tree grows to a height of nearly one hundred feet. It is found in forests where trailing vines and shrubbery make it difficult for even a foot passenger to go. Instead of growing in groups, the trees usually grow singly. The trunk is often more than two feet in diameter. The leaves are small, glossy, and pinnated. The leaflets grow in pairs, one on each side of the petiole, and there are from three to five pairs of these leaflets in every compound leaf. In shape the leaves are lanceolate although somewhat broader than the usual leaf of that shape. Is lanceolate a new word to you, Velma?"

"Yes. I do not think I ever heard it before."

"Perhaps not, as it is used only in botany and zoölogy. It really means shaped like the head of a lance. A lanceolate leaf is longer than it is broad and tapers to a point at each end."

"Thank you. I understand. You have made it so plain that it seems as if I could see the leaf."

"That is what I want to do. The flowers of the mahogany tree are in upward-growing panicles, which are loose clusters produced by the irregular branching of a flower stalk. The blossoms are white or pale yellow, and the stamens are united into a tube with eight or ten anthers within. This flower ripens into a five-celled capsule or seed vessel containing seeds winged at the point."

"It almost takes my breath away to think of a tree like you growing from a tiny seed."

"There are many more things that would seem strange to you in that far-off home of mine. It would take me hours, Velma, to tell you of all the strange plants that crowd the forest with a wealth of vivid coloring. From the tangle of verdure and bloom below, the tall trees shut out the sunlight. Then the woods ring with the cries of animals and the calls of birds. There are buzzards, strange and beautiful song birds, shrill-voiced parrots, and curious herons; while monkeys chatter all the day, swinging themselves from tree to tree."

"It must be beautiful."

"It is beautiful, child, with a strange, wild charm that no one can put into words. I lived there so long, never dreaming of the changes years were to bring me. One day the woods were invaded by a party of men. Near my home they built a camp and began hunting for mahogany trees. Soon the work of destruction began. My turn came, and I lay prostrate on the earth, my huge trunk having been sawn through."

"You poor thing!" Velma cried, winking hard to keep back the tears.

"Do not grieve, child; it was all right. Thus far my life had been enjoyment; from that time on it was to be service. We are ofttimes fitted for service in what may seem to us strange ways."

There was a brief silence. Velma moved a little nearer to the table as the voice again took up its story.

"My trunk was roughly hewn and sawn into logs twelve or fifteen feet long. Before these could be moved a road must be built, and this took a long time. At last the logs were loaded on rude trucks and drawn, by oxen, to the river bank. There they were left until flood tide when they were rolled down the

bank into the stream and floated down to the sea."

"Were you unhappy because you were leaving your dear home?"

"I could not feel otherwise than sad, yet the strange new life before me had a great fascination. At the sea we found ships waiting for us. Before being loaded we were taken ashore and rehewed and all traces of our rough journey removed."

"You must be of great value or men would not carry you so far."

"You are right. Mahogany is one of the most valuable woods known. It is also very heavy, as you will learn if you will try to lift the table upon which your arm is resting. Articles of furniture are often made of some cheap wood and covered with a thin shell of mahogany. This is called veneering. People are sometimes deceived, buying a veneered article for a solid one."

"You said something a while back that I did not understand." Velma spoke timidly. "May I ask you about it?"

"Certainly you may. It pleases me to see your interest and your desire to learn. What was it that puzzled you?"

"It was when you spoke of your history. Were you not always one of the furniture people?"

"Oh, I see what you mean! I think there will be time for a wee story along that line before Signor Malchi has finished his conversation with that customer. Velma, you know a little of the early history of this country. Can you not understand that there was a time when I was not known to civilized men?"

"Why, of course, I can. It was stupid in me not to think of it before. I forgot that a long time ago America was unknown to the rest of the people on the earth. Perhaps it does not seem so long ago to you."

"You cannot get over your surprise at my age. It may please you to learn that I owe my introduction to the notice of Europeans to a man connected with the early history of this country. Sir Walter Raleigh was a brave sailor, soldier, explorer, and warrior, as well as a scholar and an accomplished courtier. While on one of his voyages, he touched at Trinidad. This is one of the West Indies that lie not far from the coast of South America."

"And he found you there?" Velma asked breathlessly.

"Not me, but some members of my family. One of Sir Walter's ships was in need of repair. Wood was obtained from the near-by forest for this purpose. This wood was the first mahogany ever taken to Europe. Upon reaching England it was found that more extensive repairs must be made upon the same ship. The curious marking and the beautiful coloring of the rudely-hewn boards that were removed attracted the attention of the men who were at work. In that day every one was eager to know something of the strange new land beyond the sea. Another ship was soon to sail to the westward, and the crew were ordered to bring back more of this wood. It was a long time before any great amount was brought to Europe, but what did reach there commanded a fabulous price. The word mahogany as well as the botanical term *mahogoni* came from the Indian name of the tree."

Velma laid one hand caressingly upon the table's top.

"It's a long, long way from that strange forest to these little rooms of Signor Malchi."

"A long way, but it's been only one step at a time. Hark! Is not that your mother calling?"

It was. Velma ran off to see what was wanted. It was not until she had reached her own home that she remembered.

"There! I forgot to ask Mahogany if he ever really did belong to Napoleon."

CHAPTER IV

THE WHITE PINE TABLE

It was a very warm morning. In the streets, bordered by rows of tenement houses, the rays of the sun beat down pitilessly, and there was not a breath of air stirring.

Velma was very glad to carry her book and doll out to Signor Malchi's balcony. There the swaying vines shut out the rays of the sun, while the water, slowly flowing along beneath the little balcony, cooled the air.

"I am glad to be here," Velma said aloud. You see she was so accustomed to playing alone that unconsciously she talked to herself. "It's lovely here, but I suppose it is even nicer in the real country."

"You suppose! You poor little tot! It must be that you never saw the real country. This place is all very well, and I'm glad you have it, but I wish you could have a breath of forest air heavy with my fragrance. Oh, if I could be in my old home this morning, my tasseled head proudly reaching heavenward!"

Velma was much interested. It was—surely it was the old kitchen table which Signor Malchi had carried to the balcony to hold his potted plants. Well, a table represented one of the furniture people, this table as well as the one which might have belonged to Napoleon.

"You are——" and she stopped, her eyes fixed on the whitish surface of the table before her.

"White Pine, at your service. As I appear to you now, it is in humble guise, but I assure you that I am of good birth. My family is noted for usefulness, strength, and beauty."

"Haven't you any long Latin name?"

"Is it because of my want of beauty that you think I lack a Latin name? Now, I can show as much Latin as the best. My name in full is *Pinus Strobus*. We—I and my relatives—are of the genus *Pinus*, family *Coniferæ*. Don't get puzzled by those names. A genus is a division of plants ranking below a family."

"Are you a little or a big tree?"

"That question shows, child, that you know nothing about me. I will have much to tell you. Before I speak of myself I want to tell you something of pines generally. There are about seventy kinds of pine trees, twenty-six of

which grow in the United States. They are found almost exclusively in cold or temperate regions."

Velma had laid aside her doll and book. Now she sat down on a little stool and prepared to listen to all White Pine had to say.

"Some members of the Pine family are giants, reaching a height of three hundred feet. Our trunks are cylindrical and when young our bark is smooth, but in later years it is rough. There is a long trunk before branches are found. These branches differ from those of other trees. They grow in a circle round the trunk. Such an arrangement is called a whorl."

"That's an easy word to remember."

"Most children find all these terms difficult to remember, but a little determination will conquer them. To go back to the Pine family, our leaves are entirely unlike those of most other trees. In the first place they are evergreen."

"I know what that means. They never fall off."

"Not so fast, Miss Velma. Should you ever have the good fortune to walk in a pine forest, look upon the earth. You will find it strewn with the discarded leaves of the pine tree.

They do not fall all at once or on the approach of winter, as do those of most other trees."

"I'll remember that. Now please tell me how else your leaves are different."

"They are long and shaped like needles, even the point being perfect. Leaves of this shape are called acerose. They are stiff, and instead of growing singly, in pairs, or in pinnate form they are collected in little bundles called fascicles. Each bundle is bound together at the bottom by a tiny case known as a bract. Upon my parent tree each bract contained five needles, but the number varies in trees of different kinds. Other kinds of evergreens are usually grouped with pines. Some of these are the larch, hemlock, cedar, spruce, and fir. I am going to tell you first about myself. We are considered gloomy and sombre, because of the dark color of our foliage. Then, too, it grows so closely that it shuts out the rays of the sun. We are not gloomy though, even if we are a little sombre and grave."

"There is one question I must ask you," Velma cried. "Do you have flowers?"

"Flowers? Of course I have them, Velma, although I must admit that they are rather in-

significant looking. My fruit is larger and attracts attention."

"Flowers and fruit on an evergreen tree! I would be surprised if I had not already heard so many strange things from you dear furniture people."

"Bless you, child! It does one good to meet such enthusiasm as yours. Now about my flowers. They resemble those of some of the trees of which you have already learned in the fact that there are two kinds: staminate and pistillate. In the true pines, the first-named blossoms grow near the end of the lower branches. They look like wee catkins and produce the pollen."

Velma nodded her dark head.

"I understand about that, and I'll remember about the pollen. But it's your fruit that is puzzling me."

"My fruit is more directly the product of the pistillate flowers, although it would never be perfected without the pollen. These pistillate flowers are higher up in the tree, and the pollen goes to them on the breath of the wind. The blossom begins life with much the appearance of a tiny twig. However, the parts that in a twig grow into leaves, in a flower flatten out and become thin scales. They continue to grow, and

the blossom is called a cone, although, scientifically speaking, its correct name is a strobile."

"A cone," the little girl repeated. "Down at Cousin Edith's—she has a lawn—there is a tree upon which grow cones. Edith calls it a Norway spruce."

"Don't you remember that I told you the spruce trees are related to us? I am glad you have seen the cones of that tree, because it will help to bring the picture of a pine tree and its cones more plainly before you. The cones of the Norway spruce are large, in some cases six inches long. Those of the pine are pendulous, growing downward. There is always a sort of stem in the centre, called the axis. Round this the scales are arranged in rows, each row overlapping the one preceding it. The seeds are borne on these scales, and after a time they grow to be a dark brown color."

The face of Velma had grown tender, and her voice trembled with feeling as she said, "Does it not bring Him who made all things near, to learn that His works are so wonderful?"

"It does. While I rejoice that He made man with his powerful intellect and immortal soul, I remember that He also called into being the plants that cover the face of the earth with

beauty. The laws of seed life and the preservation of these plants received His attention. To the pine He gave the honor of being useful. We yield lumber, tar, pitch, and turpentine."

"Do all evergreen trees have these same cones?"

"There is a slight difference in the form of both cones and leaves. The spruce has its needles arranged on all sides of its stem. The leaves of the hemlock are flattened, and they are arranged in two rows on the stalk; the form of this compound leaf is that of a feather. In a fir tree the single-growing leaves are flattened and inclined upwards; the cones also grow upwards. Some cedars have their needle-like leaves growing in tufts, and the red cedar or juniper bears purple berries instead of cones."

"Where did the tree of which you were a part grow?"

"My home was in a forest in northern Michigan. We are a social family; where one pine is found, another is near. For long, happy years we stretched our roots downwards and our branches upwards, slowly fashioning the long, perfect trunk that would be of value to the lumberman."

"Do not pine trees sometimes grow on the sides of mountains?"

"Yes, they do. Again they are found on low, sandy tracts of land where the soil is too poor to produce anything else. In the southern part of the United States, especially near the Atlantic coast, there are extensive regions known as Pine Barrens and covered with a growth of low, scrubby trees."

"Are you an old tree? I mean did people know about you long ago?"

"Some species of my family have been known to the world for generations. The cedar is one of these. Long, long ago the Psalmist wrote, 'The righteous shall flourish like the palm-tree; he shall grow like a cedar.' In the Bible we also read how the temple at Jerusalem and Solomon's house were built largely of fir and cedar."

"Yes, I have read that."

"The great Shakespeare mentioned me. In 'The Tempest' Ariel, a sprite, was imprisoned by an evil spirit within 'a cloven pine.' Prospero tells him 'thou didst vent thy groans as fast as mill-wheels strike.' This reminds me that I have told you nothing of what is sometimes called 'the song of the pine.'"

"How nice that sounds! What is it?"

"The wind produces in the branches of the pine-tree a peculiar soft and continuous sound. This has been noted by the poets of all ages, and many beautiful things have been said about it. It has a plaintive note, and by some is considered sad."

"Why does the wind make a sound in the pine so different from that made by it in other trees?"

"Because of the unusual formation of the leaves. They are so narrow and so dense-growing, that this peculiarity adapts them to resist the force of the wind, and the sound made by it is more gentle."

"I am so glad you told me that. Pine, I like you even ——"

Velma stopped short, and the voice said, a ripple of laughter in its notes:

"Even if I am a kitchen table. Well, I have been a useful article, and have been true and honest. It is not given to all to occupy positions of beauty and nobility. Before you go I want to tell you a few of the pretty things that our own poet Longfellow has said of my relatives. Have you read 'Hiawatha'?"

"Oh, yes. We had it in school last year, and we thought it was the dearest thing."

"In 'Hiawatha's Sailing,' after the birch and the cedar had given to the Indian youth of their bark and their branches, he asked the larch for his fibrous roots to bind together the canoe.

"'The Larch with all its fibres
Shivered in the air of morning,
Touched his forehead with its tassels,'

and granted the request."

"I remember that, but now I can see the tree as you tell it. Was there not something about the fir also?"

"To the demand of her balsam,

"'The Fir Tree, tall and sombre,
Sobbed through all its robes of darkness,
Rattled like a shore with pebbles,
Answered wailing, answered sobbing,
Take my balsam, O Hiawatha!'"

It was the old kitchen table which Signor Malchi had carried to the balcony.

Before Signor Malchi could reply a customer entered the room.

CHAPTER V

A CHERRY CHAT

"Cousin Edith" was Velma's good fairy. So it came about one afternon, when that lady had returned from spending a few days in the country, that she sent Velma a basket. It was heavy, and a paper was securely tied over the top.

"What can it be, mother?" the child asked. "I know it is something nice."

"We shall soon see."

Mrs. Lee brought the scissors and cut the cord which held the paper in place.

"Oh! oh!" Velma cried, dancing around the table on which the basket stood. "Cousin Edith is the dearest woman! Was there ever anything so pretty?"

The basket was lined with green leaves. Two white boxes rested among these, one filled with late cherries and the other with red raspberries. There were also a cluster of fragrant sweet peas, a tiny wood fern growing in a pot, and a new book.

After Velma had admired her gifts and talked them over with her mother, she began to think of sharing them with others.

"There are things enough here to make a lot of people happy," she said.

The sweet peas were divided, one bunch to be taken to the sick lady on the upper floor. A dish of red raspberries was set aside for Mary Flynn, the sewing girl who lived across the hall. For Signor Malchi the little girl selected two dozen of the largest and finest cherries. They were arranged in a pretty dish and bordered with green leaves.

The face of the Italian beamed with pleasure.

"It is most good in you, my child, to remember old Malchi. Ah, the pretty cherries! They make me think of the far-gone days when I was young and gathered them—red as one's life blood—from the green boughs. That was in sunny Italy, my own dear home!"

"Does this same kind of cherry grow there?" Velma asked.

Before Signor Malchi could reply to her question, a customer entered the room. Velma scowled. It did seem as if that was always the way—just as the good Signor was ready to say something interesting, a customer appeared.

Then she remembered that her friend was always glad to see customers. Why, if none came the old man would have no way to earn his bread.

"I'll wait until he comes back, though, for I want to hear about the cherries."

"Why not let me tell you, Velma? I think I am better informed than even your good Signor."

"You!" and Velma stared blankly at the little rocking-chair. "What do you know about these cherries?"

"I know that they are the fruit of my cousin. Sit down here in my lap, little girl, and I will tell you all about it. Don't be afraid of hurting me. I am young and strong, for I have been a chair only three years. The way that I came to be here was this; one of my rockers became loose, so I had to be sent away from home for repairs. This kind old man has made me as good as new."

The chair was a simple one with a cane seat and back. The frame was of a reddish wood and highly polished.

Velma sat down, after having placed the dish of fruit on the table. She did not quite understand, so she asked:

"Are you one of the furniture people? And how are you related to the cherries?"

"One question at a time, if you please. Yes, I am one of the furniture people. My name is Wild Black Cherry. The fruit on the table grew on one of my cousins, and he is usually known simply as Cherry. Our botanical name is *Cerasus* which came from the name of the ancient city Cerasus. We are of the genus *Prunus.*"

"I don't understand yet," Velma cried. "I thought fruit and furniture people were—well, different."

There was a merry laugh before Wild Cherry said, "We—my cousin who provides the delicious fruit and myself—are two members of the same family. He is cultivated for his fruit, his wood being of little value. My fruit is not considered good as an article of food, but the wood of my trunk is used to make many pretty articles of furniture."

"Thank you. I see how it is now. Will you tell me how you look?"

"Certainly I will. Doubtless it will be more polite if I begin with the head of the family, Cherry."

"Oh yes, I want to hear about him!"

"The cherry tree does not grow tall, but has wide-spreading limbs. It has smooth, shiny leaves, and early in the spring it is covered with white blossoms. These come just before or with the leaves. They are in clusters. Each flower is a complete one, with a green calyx, broad white petals, and many yellow stamens. A prettier sight than a tree loaded with white blossoms is not often seen."

Velma leaned forward, her breath coming fast.

"It seems as if I could see just how it looks."

"Doubtless some day you will really see it. In Japan the cherry is raised extensively, and the blossoming time is one of general rejoicing. People make long journeys to see the fine groves that are in some parts of the country, and there is much merrymaking and feasting. This time is called the 'Festival of the Cherry Blossoms.'"

"Do they not celebrate the time when the delicious fruit ripens?"

"Not with so much rejoicing. Cherries grow in clusters called umbels or racemes. Each individual cherry is pendent from a stem or pedicel, and these unite at one point. The fruit is a drupe."

"A drupe! I thought it was a cherry."

Wild Cherry joined in Velma's laugh. After a moment he went on to explain the new term.

"A drupe is a fleshy fruit. This fleshy part is known as the sarcocarp and has in its centre a single hard stone. This stone, which in the cherry is often called the pit, encloses the seed. Velma, can you name any other fruit which is a drupe?"

"Yes, there is the peach."

"The plum is another. Then there is the date, the fruit of the date palm. There are many different varieties of this cherry of which I have been telling you. It has been greatly improved by cultivation."

"Now about yourself," Velma volunteered. "Do you always grow wild?"

"Yes. I am found in many parts of the United States. My general habits of growth are much like those of my cousin, except that I am taller, and my blossoms are less beautiful."

"Do you have fruit?"

"Yes, but it is seldom eaten save by the wild birds. They flit about among our branches, paying us for their meals by sweet songs. Occasionally an adventurous schoolboy clambers into our boughs and finds that the black, berry-

like drupes are agreeable to the taste even if somewhat piquant."

"It is too bad that you do not receive more ——" Velma began, but Wild Cherry interrupted her with a ringing laugh.

"Do not think for a minute, Velma, that I am unhappy or that I envy my relatives. Indeed, I would not exchange places with Cherry. Often his surroundings are artificial, while mine are close to nature's heart. Then, even if my fruit is not so eagerly sought, while growing I am slowly building up a strong body which will some day prove a blessing to mankind. That is the way we all feel."

"It is beautiful in you to feel that way!" the little girl cried. "Do cherries grow in all parts of the world? Signor Malchi spoke of their being found in Italy."

"Various species of the fruit can be found in many countries. It may interest you to know that in parts of Germany the public roads for miles are shaded by rows of cherry trees."

"They must be very pretty, but I should think those who pass along the road would gather the fruit."

"They are welcome to it, as welcome as they are to the refreshing shade. France, also, has

many cherry trees, and in some parts of this country during their season they furnish a considerable part of the food of the charcoal-burners, and the wood-cutters. One of the dishes they make is cherry soup."

The little girl opened her dark eyes very wide.

"That must be a queer dish; but it may be that some of ours would be as strange to the French people."

"Perhaps so. I am not the only variety of the wild cherry. There are several that are natives of the Old World. One of these, *Cerasus Avium*, is valuable for its strong, close-grained wood. This wood is used in the making of musical instruments."

Velma rocked slowly back and forth in the chair. She was much interested in the cherry tree. It was as if she could see it, the bright-colored fruit peering from among the softly-swaying green leaves. Surely the sound that she heard was the wind in those same leaves. No, it was Wild Cherry's voice. He was saying:

"I have another good point. My bark is considered of medicinal value. Even my fruit is sometimes used for that purpose."

"I am so glad that I came in while you were here, Wild Cherry!" And Velma stroked the arm of the chair with soft touches. "It is a beautiful thing to be a tree."

"I think so. Now let me tell you something said of me by Longfellow, who has so often been called the 'children's poet.' In his 'Autumn' you may read,

> "'The purple finch,
> That on wild cherry and red cedar feeds,
> A winter bird, comes with its plaintive whistle.'"

"Are there any more stories or poems about you or your cousins?"

"There is a story about my cousin, but, Velma, I am sure you must know it."

"I? Why I am sure I never heard it."

"It cannot be possible that so patriotic a little lassie as you are has not heard of the boyhood of George Washington. You know he owned a hatchet."

"A—— Oh, it was a cherry tree that some people say he cut down!"

Just then Signor Malchi, whose customer had departed, turned towards Velma, and she hastened to him with the dish of cherries.

CHAPTER VI

THE TALE OF THE EBONY WRITING DESK

One warm day Velma's mother had a severe headache. The little girl was sorry, and she was also much disappointed, for Mrs. Lee had promised to take her daughter to the park that afternoon.

"It is too bad, dear. Perhaps we can go on Monday," the mother said faintly.

Velma made no reply. She stood at the window, looking out into the narrow street. It had been so long since she had seen the waving leaves and the gleaming, sunlighted waters of the park fountains!

She was turning away from the window, a feeling of impatience at her heart, when she chanced to get a glimpse of her mother's white, sorrowful face.

"How bad she is feeling! Poor mother! Velma Lee, I am ashamed of you."

That was what the little girl said to herself. Before speaking aloud, she brought a basin of

fresh water and began to bathe her mother's head.

"Monday will do just as well; I will have two more days to think about it. Now you are to go to sleep and dream of the country; then I'll go out on the balcony. It may be that I shall find some of the furniture people there."

Velma did not stir until her mother's closed eyes and regular breathing showed that she was sleeping. Then the child tiptoed across the room and carefully closed the door behind her. Once in the hall, she hastened to the rooms of the old Italian.

He looked up from his work with his usual grave, kindly smile.

"A new friend for you is on the balcony. I took it out there where the air was cool to give it the grand polish. It is old, yes, very old."

A few moments more, and Velma stood before a quaint old writing desk. It was made of a strange black wood. Occasionally this wood was crossed by an irregular streak of a dark yellowish-brown. The entire surface was glossy, being so well polished that it reflected the objects before it, although in a strange blurred way.

The form of the desk was not like those with which Velma was familiar. The upper part

was carved and inlaid with a few pieces of yellowish ivory. Beneath this was a wide shelf for books. Then came a slanting lid covering a space divided into many small compartments. This lid was rich with carvings in high relief and, when let down, formed a table for writing. The whole rested on a stout, table-like frame from which four heavy legs reached to the floor.

Velma peered into the compartments. Some were closed by tiny doors, and others were filled by shallow drawers. Both doors and drawers opened by means of button-like ivory knobs.

"Yes, you are old, old," the little girl said, a thrill of reverence in her voice. "I think it must be nearly one hundred years since some one's hands fashioned you into this desk."

"It is a little more than that. I have held many secrets since that day. Sometimes I have stood in baronial halls, for I first lived far over the sea. Again, for a score of years, I was the property of a miserly lawyer who prized me only because my lock was strong."

"And now?" Velma asked. "To whom do you now belong?"

The highly-polished surface of the desk shone, as if a ray of sunlight had fallen upon it.

"Now, I am to have a new home. It is to be the study of a sweet-faced young girl to whom God has given the poet's gift. Ah, it is a priceless boon! Upon my table she will record the visions that come to her."

"Where was your first home? Why, you have forgotten to tell me who you are, but I am sure you must belong to a distinguished family."

"I am considered valuable, both because of my rareness, and because it costs a great deal to bring me from my native country to the place where I am to be used in the manufacture of furniture. My family name is *Diospyros*. As one of the furniture people I am Ebony. This name has a curious derivation. It came from a Hebrew word, *hobnin*, meaning stone. The Greek form of the same word was *ebenos*, and the Latin *ebenum*."

"Where do ebony trees grow?"

"I grew in Ceylon, and it is from that country, or island, I should say, that the best specimens of wood come. The trees are also found in India and Madagascar. The West Indies also yield a kind of ebony, the *Brya Ebenus*."

"Are all kinds as pretty as you are?"

"Thank you. That is a graceful compliment. Ebony is always dark, although some species are lighter than myself. A few have a greenish-brown tint. All take a high polish."

"I should like to know how you—the tree that was you—looks, if you please."

"I shall be very glad to tell you. My parent tree was tall, for we all reach a great size. The leaves of the ebony tree are oblong, thick, and shining. They are deciduous. I think you know what that means."

"It means that they fall off every year."

"Yes, that is right. I have an abundance of small white flowers. Their petals are white, yet a short time after opening they are tinged with red. There is one peculiarity about my trunk that I want to make plain to you."

Velma had been leaning against the desk. She now stood upright and prepared to listen with the utmost attention.

"My trunk is what is called an exogenus stem. This means that it grows from the outside, the new growth being an external addition. My wood is desirable only when mature. So what is called the heartwood—really the inside part of the trunk—is all that is carried away from the country where the tree grows. Some

of the ebony trees of Ceylon are so large that logs of this heartwood are twelve or fifteen feet long and two feet in diameter."

"I should not think there would be enough of you to make much furniture."

"We are seldom made into solid pieces of furniture. Ebony is used principally for veneering. This desk is made of a cheaper and lighter wood and covered with a thin sheet of ebony. No, it is not deceit, not in most cases at least, as it is universally understood that furniture is not made of solid ebony. Now, I am going to take a moment to tell you a little of the beauties of my old home, Ceylon."

"I suppose the trees and flowers there are very different from ours."

"They are. Although more than a century has passed since I left my home, I still love to think of it. Vegetation grows luxuriantly in that damp, moist climate. One of the wonderful trees is the India-rubber, although this one is not so productive as the one of South America. Palms of many kinds grow in Ceylon. One of these—the fan palm—spreads out its broad leaves like a peacock's tail. The acacia tree, too, is beautiful, being covered with a profusion of golden-yellow flowers. The cinnamon

tree is also found there, and its pure white blossoms are very attractive."

"How beautiful it must be!"

"There are many other wonders. One of these is the nepenthes or 'pitcher plant.' It has a great butterfly-like blossom whose pale green petals are veined with maroon. The frangipani is another magnificent plant having golden-hearted white blossoms, whose fragrance is much like that of their cousin, the jasmine."

"Were you known to men long ago?"

"Yes, very long ago. In the strange old Egyptian tombs, paintings have been discovered, proving that I was known to that nation at an early date. These pictures show the Egyptian envoys receiving ebony logs from tribes obliged to pay tribute to Egypt. There is no doubt that ebony was known in that country fifteen hundred years before the birth of our Saviour."

"Oh, I cannot even imagine things happening so long ago as that!"

"It certainly is a long time ago. After that I was well known to the Greeks and Romans. It is supposed that they obtained ebony from India and also from Madagascar. About this time the inlaying of my dark wood with ivory

was introduced. The contrast made a fine effect. You will find ebony mentioned in the Old Testament. The prophet Ezekiel, in recording the riches of the city Tyrus says, 'They brought thee for a present horns of ivory and ebony.'"

Just then Signor Malchi came out upon the balcony. Velma looked up at him, her face sparkling with delight.

"It is such a dear old desk!"

"Yes, and it has held many, many strange things. The hates and the loves—they have been locked up in it. Now the ones who loved and hated—ah, they have gone away, but the desk is still here."

CHAPTER VII

WHAT VELMA LEARNED OF THE MAPLE

" ' For peace and for plenty, for freedom, for rest,
For joy in the land from the East to the West,
For the dear starry flag with its red, white and blue,
We thank Thee from hearts that are honest and true.' "

VELMA was singing softly to herself as she entered the largest of the rooms of Signor Malchi.

"I like to sing Thanksgiving and Christmas songs when it is so hot," she had said the day before. "It makes me feel cool."

Just as she stopped singing, the little girl's eyes rested on a piece of furniture that she had never seen before. She started.

"Why, what is that? It is—well, it is ——"

"Grandma Bartley's chest of drawers," a crisp voice said. "Dear me! What are the children of this generation coming to? Not to know a chest of drawers! There, child, do not look so frightened. I don't suppose you are to blame, but trouble is likely to make one impatient."

Velma looked wistfully at the chest of drawers. There were four drawers, one above the other, and they were wide and deep. The top of the chest or "bureau," as some people called it, was smooth and plain.

The little girl bent closer to examine the wood. It was of a very light yellow, almost white, in fact, and had a satin-like luster. Wavy dots and lines marked its surface. Somehow it made Velma think of the shifting lights and shades seen in the folds of Cousin Edith's satin dinner dress.

"It is too bad that you are in trouble. Cannot I help you?"

"No, dear heart, although your sympathy does lighten the load a little. You see, I am old-fashioned, and am sent off here because no one of the family wants me. Sixty years ago when Grandma Bartley—she was a pretty girl then—began housekeeping, I went into the new home with her. All those years I was her friend. My drawers held the clothes for her children, and it was from one of them that the little white robe for her dead baby was taken. Even when she grew old and feeble she trusted me with her treasures. But now she is dead, and none of the family want the old chest of

drawers. So here I am in Signor Malchi's rooms, seeking a purchaser."

"I am sure you will find one who will give you a good home. The Signor says old-fashioned things are much sought for now."

"Is that so? Some one may come to care for me yet. You have done me good, dear child. Now draw that chair close up to my side, and I will tell you all about myself and my place in the furniture world."

Velma hastened to do the bidding of the voice. As she sat down she brushed her fingertips lightly over the wood of the chest and said:

"It is so shiny and pretty!"

"Thank you. I am Maple of the genus *Acer*. That is a Latin word and means sharp. Some scholars say that it was applied to the trees now known as maples because their hard wood was used for making spears."

Velma nodded her head.

"I wonder and wonder over the nice stories there are about things. Even words have whole stories to them."

"The world is indeed filled with marvelous tales. As for myself, I am Hard or Sweet Maple, botanically known as *Acer Saccharinum*.

I have still other names. These waves and dots in my wood have given me the name of Bird's Eye, or Curly Maple."

"You have a good many names. Are there other kinds of maple trees?"

"Oh, yes. In all, there are eighty varieties, eight or nine of which are found in the United States. They grow in the temperate zones. My own particular species is found from Canada to Georgia, and from Nova Scotia to the Rocky Mountains. In height, we range from forty to eighty feet, and our trunks are sometimes four feet in diameter."

"Why, I know you!" Velma cried breathlessly. "Yesterday mamma and I went to the park, and I am sure it is one of your brothers or cousins that grows near the gate."

"Doubtless it is. We are largely cultivated as shade trees. When one of us gets full-grown, our gnarled roots may often be found on the top of the ground. Upon a young tree the bark is slightly furrowed, and the color is gray clouded with umber."

"Umber! What is that?"

"It is a dark brownish tint. As the maple tree grows older its bark becomes shaggy with long, deep furrows and woody ridges."

"This tree at the park had rough bark and pretty leaves."

"Did you notice that the leaves grew opposite to each other in pairs?"

Velma's face grew red.

"I never thought to look. I wish I had."

"Well, you will the next time. The leaves have long, slender stems. Mine are nearly round with blunt notches, while the notches of Silver Maple are sharp. Botanically speaking, the shape of the maple leaf is palmate."

The voice paused a moment, and Velma ventured to say:

"That is another new word."

"Ah, I thought so. A palmate leaf is one having five divisions or lobes. The word comes from *palma* and means hand."

"Oh, I see! The maple leaf is not shaped like a hand, but there are just as many lobes as the hand has fingers."

"I am glad to see, Velma, that you are thinking as well as listening. On the hard maple, the leaves and flowers come together. These last-named are in axillary corymbs. Have you had the meaning of that last word explained to you?"

"No," and Velma looked much puzzled.

"I do not know what either of the words mean."

"Then I will tell you. A corymb is a flat-topped flower cluster. The hard maple's corymbs are pendulous on thread-like pedicels. Axillary has reference to their place of growth. An axil is the angle formed by the junction of the upper part of a leaf-stalk with a stem or branch. Axillary means growing from this angle or axil."

"Thank you. I understand now."

"Each of these flowers of mine has a bell-shaped, fringed calyx with eight or ten stamens within. The flowers of a cousin of mine, Red or Swamp Maple, are quite different. They come very early and are bright red tufts. The poet Lowell calls them 'the maple's corals.' These blossoms grow so quickly that the whole tree seems to be colored red."

"The maple tree does not have fruit, does it?"

"Yes, Velma, it does bear a fruit, although it is very unlike that to which the name is usually applied. It is really a seed vessel and is flat and two-winged. Such a fruit is called a samara. Red Maple's flowers, as I said, come very early. In May his seeds fall, and they soon germinate.

Mine remain on the tree until autumn, and they do not start to grow until the following spring."

"I should think Red Maple's flowers would freeze if they start so early."

"The buds while growing are protected by scales. These are brown and shining coats that turn aside both wind and rain. Then, when the flower does appear, the inner part—really the germ—is still protected by the red cloak of the corolla."

"Oh, I have just thought of something!" and Velma sprang up, clapping her hands. "You said one of your names was Sugar Maple. Do you have anything to do with maple sugar?"

"I have a great deal to do with it, as it is made from my sap. This sap is obtained early in the spring before the leaves start. A hole is made in the trunk of the tree, and from this the sap runs, by way of a tiny trough, into a bucket. This sap is boiled, first to syrup. The boiling is continued until the syrup granulates, when it is maple sugar."

"And a delicious thing it is!"

"I think all children and not a few grown people will agree with you. Now have you heard enough about me, or shall I tell you of

the wondrous coloring that autumn brings to my foliage?"

"Tell me that, please. I could not hear too much about you."

"Too much cannot be said about the beauty of my leaves in autumn. When that season comes, our summer's work is finished. We have worked hard, for growing is no easy thing. Our stock of wood has been added to. The water from the soil and the gas from the air have been mixed in the right proportions, and even the winter buds are already at the end of the branches. These are coated with resinous scales and lined with vegetable wool. When all is ready for our winter's rest, our green leaves change to scarlet, yellow, and crimson. For a few days before the leaves fall, the woods are a dream of beauty. It is our great holiday time."

"Mother has told me about the woods in the fall. Some day I shall see them for myself."

"When you do, notice the shades of the coloring. One who looked upon them with an artist's eye said there was 'red of every shade from crimson to cherry, yellow from bright sulphur to orange, brown from clove-brown to liver-brown, and green from grass-green to olive-green.'"

"It is—it must be a picture."

"It is a picture, of which Nature is the artist. It is a picture containing

> "'All the hues
> The rainbow knows, and all that met the eye
> In flowers of field and garden.'"

"Tell me something more that the poets have said," Velma coaxed, nestling close to the chest of drawers. "It makes me feel as I do when I hear the great organ at church."

"When you are older, I hope you will come to know the writings of John Burroughs. He may be called a prose poet. In his 'Autumn Fields,' he has much to say of my coloring. One thought is, 'When the maples have burst out into color, showing like great bonfires along the hills, there is indeed a feast to the eye.' Further on, he tells us how the sunlight, falling through my leaves, fills the air with a 'soft golden glow.'"

"I will read his books some day."

"Now, there is just time for this bit from Mrs. Whitney:

> "'The leaves are ripe; earth everywhere
> Is gorgeous with their color stain;
> A glory streams through all the air,
> Like light in church through tinted pane.'"

As Velma made her way across the hall, this beautiful verse kept ringing in her ears.

Egyptian envoys receiving ebony logs from tribes obliged to pay tribute to Egypt.

"You can eat lunch in the shade of the vines."

CHAPTER VIII

A PLEASANT LUNCH WITH THE ASH TABLE

One evening, a carriage halted in the street before the tenement house. The richly-dressed lady who descended from it did not go to the rooms of Signor Malchi, but to those of Mrs. Lee.

It proved to be Mrs. Harrison, a lady for whom Velma's mother had done embroidery and lacework. She came to see if Mrs. Lee would come to her home and mend some pieces of rare old lace.

Velma's mother was very glad of the work, and the price offered was an excellent one. However, she hesitated about promising to go. If she did so her little daughter must stay alone all day.

"I will not mind it, not very much," the child said. "You know I play on the balcony so much of the time, and Signor Malchi will be company for me."

So it was arranged that Mrs. Lee should go to the home of Mrs. Harrison at nine o'clock the

next morning. The kind old Italian offered to see that no harm came to Velma.

Mrs. Lee arranged Velma's dinner on a tray and covered it with a snowy cloth. This was to be a surprise, the little girl agreeing not to lift the cover until dinner time.

After finishing the morning work, the child settled down to enjoy the new book sent her by Cousin Edith. She knew that Signor Malchi was at work on the balcony and thought she would not go there until he had finished.

Velma became so much interested in her book that she failed to notice how time was flying. It was noon when Signor Malchi rapped upon her door. He was ready to go to the little near-by café where he took his meals.

"There is a dining-room table on the balcony," he said, a twinkle in his eyes. "I have been cleaning it up. It is a new one of what you call the furniture people. Let me carry the tray out there. You can eat the lunch in the shade of the vines."

Velma was delighted. The Signor carried the tray out to the balcony. Upon the table there was already a great golden orange, a pitcher of iced lemonade, and a quaint cup; and beside it was a little three-legged stool that Signor Malchi

had placed there for her. Then the old man took his departure, bidding Velma to lock the door behind him.

After doing that, the little girl returned to the balcony. She stood a moment looking out at the water, which was rippling and dancing under a slight breeze. Then, advancing to the table, she threw back the cloth.

"She is such a dear good mother!" was the child's first exclamation. "It looks—well, good enough to eat."

There were peanut sandwiches made of brown bread, a bit of celery, some cookies, and a bowl of blackberries. All was arranged with dainty care and looked most appetizing.

Before sitting down, Velma noticed the table upon which her lunch was placed. It had a large square top, and the legs were stiff and straight. The wood was light-colored, close-grained, and seemed tough and elastic.

"Would you like me to tell you my story while you are at lunch?" a voice asked. "You see, so much of my life, I mean since I was a table, has been connected with people's eating that I am most at ease then."

"I should enjoy it very much, thank you," Velma said politely. Then she added, "Signor

Malchi said you were a new friend, but you look much like oak."

"There is some resemblance in the two woods. I am, Ash of the genus *Fraxinus*, a member of the great Olive or *Oleaceæ* family. This is my native country, and I am commonly called White Ash to distinguish me from the rest of my family, for I have several cousins."

"Are you found in all parts of the United States? I hope you do not mind my asking questions."

"I am glad I can interest you enough to have you ask questions. I am not found to any extent in the extreme South, but am abundant in Canada and New Brunswick. I grow to a great size, my trunk sometimes rising undivided to a height of forty feet. The bark of the white ash is lighter in color than is that of the other varieties."

Velma was too much interested to eat; in fact, she forgot her lunch and leaned far over the table, listening intently.

"Do not forget your sandwiches, Velma, in listening to my story. Next come my leaves. They are deciduous and pinnate, also of a lighter shade of green than are those of the other ash trees."

"Of course you have flowers?" the little girl said in a tone that made the words a question. At the same time she took a bite of the celery.

"Yes, I have flowers, but I must admit that they are not marked by any particular beauty. These blossoms grow in racemes and spring from the axil of the leaves of the previous year. In some kinds of ash trees the calyx of the flower is missing, but this is not the case with mine."

"When the flowers fade, what comes then?"

"A seed vessel called a samara. This is foliaceous at its upper end. What is the trouble, Velma? I see that you look puzzled."

"It is that word—foliaceous."

"Why, foliaceous means like a leaf, and the end of the ash samara is leaf-shaped. This fruit is simply, as in the case of most trees, a receptacle for the seeds."

"I often think how beautiful it must be to be a tree," Velma said thoughtfully. Then she gave the top of the table a caressing little touch. "After that it must be dreadful to be a table."

"No, dear child, it is not dreadful. It has also been a beautiful thing to have a family gather around me three times each day and thank God for His blessings. My years as a tree were delightful ones, but it is right that I should

be of service to some one. When you are a woman, Velma, you will understand that it is God's will that years of usefulness should follow those of joy and freedom from care."

"I see, and it is a lovely thing to remember," Velma said softly. "Have you not something more to tell me?"

"There is much more to tell. Long, long ago I was venerated by the people of Scandinavia. The mythology of that country gives a strange story about the first man and the first woman who inhabited the earth. Their names are given as Ask (Ash) and Embla (Elm). The story runs that a new world called Midgard had been formed and was placed midway between the lands of frost and fire. There were no inhabitants save the gods, the chief of whom was Odin. Two pieces of wood were found floating in the sea near Midgard. These the gods fashioned into Ask and Embla. I had still another place in this mythology. It was under the ash tree, Ygdrasil, that the gods held their council."

Velma's dark eyes were wide open. Ash went on speaking, a note of reverent pride in his voice.

"These stories are not my sole claim to antiquity. It may be because of them that my

twigs were long considered a charm against witchcraft and magic. However, with the Romans I was considered the emblem of war."

"Did they really believe in witchcraft?" Velma asked scornfully. "I think that very silly, don't you?"

"It is not very sensible, viewed in the light of to-day. Some of our present-day writers tell of a belief common among the mountaineers of the South. They believe that my leaves and twigs are charms against snakes. Others claim that I am poisonous to reptiles, and give instances of the early settlers building their houses near ash trees, or of Indians seeking the same shade for their wigwams. I think there is no real basis for this belief, as I never noticed reptiles shunning me more than other trees."

"I would not like snakes to come near me," Velma said, shivering a little, "but I know I would like the woods. There must be many beautiful things there."

"You are right, Velma. Among all the beauties of sight and sound there was none I loved better than the birds. They used to nest among my branches and sing the sweetest songs to me."

"Maple told me how beautiful he was in

autumn. That must be a playtime for you all and—oh, I beg your pardon!"

"I do not understand you, Velma. What is it for which you are asking my pardon?"

The little girl's cheeks were crimson, but she replied bravely, "I thought it might be that the beloved holiday time came only to the maples. If so, it might make you feel bad to hear about it."

"No, no, dear. That would be jealousy. Autumn brings to all deciduous trees a resting time. Maple is the most gayly-dressed of any of us, but there is no envy in our hearts towards him. It is a happy time for us all, a time when the very air seems to sing,

> "'There is a beautiful spirit breathing now
> Its mellowed richness on the clustered trees.'"

"Oh, I am so glad you furniture people love each other!"

"Love is what binds the parts of the earth into one perfect whole. While I am not so pretty as Maple, Velma, autumn brings me a charm of my own. From the inner room, I heard Maple telling you what the kind-hearted naturalist, John Burroughs, said of him. He also paid me a fine compliment."

"Oh, how nice! Please tell it to me."

"These are his words, and they give a fair picture of me in my fall dress. 'The richest shades of plum color to be seen—becoming by and by, or in certain lights, a deep maroon—are afforded by the ash tree. Then, at a distance, there seems to be a sort of bloom on it, as upon the grape or plum.'"

Ash stopped, and Velma waited for him to go on. Instead of doing so he said:

"There is Signor Malchi's knock. Run, Velma, and let him in."

CHAPTER IX

THE CHESTNUT AS FOOD AND AS FURNITURE

WEDNESDAY was a rainy day. From morning until evening the raindrops softly tapped against the windows, as if coaxing for admittance. During the night, Velma awoke once and could still hear the patter of the rain. When she was dressing on Thursday morning, she looked out of the window. To her surprise, the rain was still falling, although it was little more than a gray mist.

"I wish the sun would shine." There was a ring of impatience in Velma's voice. "The days are so long and dreary when it rains!"

"You know there is a way to make sunshine in the house, no matter what the weather may be," Mrs. Lee said gently.

It was a moment before Velma spoke. Her dark head was bent over her dish of oatmeal. At last she said:

"Mother, do you think Mrs. Grayson would like me to read to her this morning?"

These the gods fashioned into Ask and Embla.

The chair was a huge affair with a high back.

"I am sure she would, dear."

Mrs. Grayson was the invalid lady on the upper floor. She was a great sufferer, and her eyes were so inflamed that the doctors had forbidden her to use them. The days were long for the poor woman, and she was glad to have any one read to her.

Velma waited to wipe the dishes and to put the wee sitting-room in order. Then she tripped up-stairs, her face as bright as if it were sunny out of doors.

"It must be that the gray storm is over," the invalid said when the bright-faced little girl bent over her bed. "It does me good just to look at you."

Velma first read a chapter from the Bible, then one from Thomas à Kempis's "Imitation of Christ."

"Shall I stay a little longer?" she asked, when the last-named book had been returned to its place on the little stand by the sick woman's bed. "I brought my own 'Patsy' and thought you might like to hear a few pages from that. It is such a good story!"

"Indeed, I should like to hear it. It gives me great pleasure to hear you read."

The forenoon was half gone when Velma de-

scended the stairs. Her mother looked up from her sewing, a smile on her lips.

"Signor Malchi looked in a moment ago to invite you to call. He has been up on Long Street in the rain and said he had found something that he thought you would like."

Velma waited to hear no more, but hastened across the hall. The old Italian greeted her gayly.

"It does one good to look on the bright little face on the gray morning. See! I found these at the store of one of my countrymen and brought them to you. They came from my own country."

While speaking, he had handed Velma a quaint old brown plate. On it was a half pint of fine, large chestnuts, and they were wreathed round with a spray of cinnamon vine. This had come from the balcony, and upon the silver-green, heart-shaped leaves drops of moisture still sparkled.

"Thank you, thank you!" Velma cried. "They are so pretty! You know how to make a picture of anything."

"I am glad to give you the pleasure, my little friend. Sit down in this chair and eat the nuts."

The chair was a huge affair with a high back. This back was carved in an open-work design. There were massive arms, and the tapestry cushion on the seat was worn and faded. Velma had learned to look closely at the wood from which furniture was made. She observed that this was light and close-grained. Sitting down she prepared to enjoy the nuts.

"It's something like a joke of the dear old man's," began a voice. "I mean that you are sitting in a chestnut chair, eating chestnuts, and listening to Chestnut."

"How strange! Is it really true? Did these delicious nuts grow on a tree that is one of the furniture people? And is the wood from which the chair is made from one of these same trees?"

"There are three questions in a single breath. Yet, yes will truthfully answer them all. But I have more to tell you, and it is such a nice, quiet morning for a visit."

Velma nestled down in the chair and wondered how she could ever have grumbled because it rained.

"I am Chestnut, otherwise known as *Castanea Vesca.* That name comes from Castana, a town in Asia Minor. We are natives of the United

States, Europe, and Asia Minor, and are distantly related to the Oaks."

"Do the trees in that far-off land have such nuts as these?" the little girl asked, at the same time beginning on another chestnut.

"They are much alike. My nuts are smaller than those of the old-world trees, such as you are eating, and also sweeter. Chestnut trees grow to a great size and often have wide-spreading branches. The leaves are long, lanceolate, and acuminate. That last word means that they terminate in a long tapering point. The edge of each leaf is notched, having saw-like teeth which point forward. A leaf with this peculiarity is called a serrated leaf."

Velma caught her breath.

"That is a good deal to remember about your leaves, dear Chestnut, but I think I can do it. They are lanceolate, acuminate, and serrated."

"That is good. Now, put it in your own words, as if you saw the leaf."

"It is much longer than wide, tapers down to a point, and has sharp notches all round its edges."

There was a sound as of a laugh of satisfaction. Then Chestnut said:

"You are an apt pupil. Next, you shall hear

about my flowers. There are two kinds. The staminate are long catkins, and each catkin is made up of clusters of tiny blossoms. The pistillate flowers—really the nuts—have a tiny cup not unlike the one that you learned was the saucer of Oak's acorn. This is called an involucre and contains three wee blossoms. The pollen from the staminate flower falls upon the pistillate one, and it grows and grows. The involucre or burr encloses the flowers and becomes a stiff case covered with sharp thorns. Within, the burr is soft and satiny and holds three nuts. These are like the ones in your lap."

"How do people get them out of the prickly burr?"

"That is Jack Frost's part. When the nuts are ripe, the frost sprite tweaks each burr, and it opens in four parts, dropping its nuts to the earth."

"How delightful it all is!"

"It is indeed delightful to gather chestnuts on a clear autumn day when the sun's rays have driven away Jack Frost. The long leaves of the tree have turned from green to yellow and are thickly strewn upon the ground, half hiding the nuts. The squirrels and the chipmunks, too, are busy, carrying away nuts for their

winter supply of food. Then comes the long evenings when, in country homes, the chestnuts are roasted in the open fires. Just think, Velma, if all the chestnuts that ripen in a single year were to be planted! Remember that every time you eat a nut, you eat what might have been a whole tree."

Velma laughed gayly.

"Then this morning I have devoured a good-sized grove. Do you trees live to be old?"

"We live many years, and some members of our family have grown to an enormous size. A celebrated chestnut tree on Mount Etna measured two hundred feet in circumference, but trees of that size are very rare. It may interest you to know that in the southern part of Europe, these nuts form a principal part of the food of the working classes. Not only do they eat them as you are now doing, but they also roast and boil them. Then they are also ground into flour from which bread is made. Signor Malchi can tell you about that, for the part of Italy where he spent his boyhood days has large groves of chestnut trees."

"You are such a beautiful and useful tree that I am sure the poets have sung your praises."

"Our beloved Longfellow immortalized me in 'The Village Blacksmith.' You remember it begins,

"'Under a spreading chestnut tree
The village smithy stands.'"

"I do remember that. We had the poem in school, and our teacher told us that there was such a tree in Cambridge where the poet lived."

"Yes, there was, and it stood before the 'smithy,' or blacksmith shop. When, on account of widening the street, it was cut down, the school children of Cambridge brought contributions enough to have made from the wood of the tree an armchair for the poet. This was presented to him on his seventy-second birthday."

"That was such a nice thing for them to do. Was Mr. Longfellow pleased?"

"He was delighted. The chair always stood before his study fire. The wood was ebonized, so that it is a dead black in color. The upholstery of the arms is in green leather, and there is a cushion of the same material. In the back is a circular piece of fine carving representing horse-chestnut leaves and blossoms. Underneath the cushion is a brass plate on which are inscribed these words: 'To the author of "The

Village Blacksmith," this chair, made from the wood of the spreading chestnut tree, is presented as an expression of grateful regard and veneration by the children of Cambridge, who with their friends join in the good wishes and congratulations on this anniversary, February 27, 1879.' "

"I am so glad that you have told me this nice story, Chestnut."

"Then, I will tell you one thing more about it before you go. Mr. Longfellow conveyed his thanks to the children in a graceful little poem, 'From my Armchair.' One stanza of this runs,

> " ' And thus, dear children, have you made for me
> This day of jubilee,
> And to my more than threescore years and ten
> Brought back my youth again.' "

"It is a birthday gift from your friend, Signor Malchi."

The Indians used to fashion various vessels from the bark.

CHAPTER X

A BIRTHDAY TREAT AND BIRCH'S TALE

VELMA'S next introduction to one of the furniture people occurred under somewhat different circumstances than had any of the former ones. On the fourth of August she would be ten years old. Two days before, a note came from Cousin Edith, asking Mrs. Lee and Velma to come to visit her on that day.

It proved to be a very warm morning, so that they made an early start. Velma always enjoyed a street-car ride, especially when it took her by pretty suburban homes where there were green lawns and beds of flowers.

Upon reaching their destination, they found that a long carriage ride had been planned for them. They went out a little way into what Velma called "the really, truly country," returning to the home of Cousin Edith in time for luncheon.

The luncheon was a nice little birthday feast. Velma found at her plate a pretty new ring,

and on the table there was an iced cake with ten pink candles upon it.

After luncheon, Velma's mother and cousin sat on the veranda, sewing, while the child played with some little girls who had been invited in her honor.

Mrs. Lee and her daughter were obliged to start for home early, as a lady was to call at the tenement house at six for some embroidery that the widow had just completed. When they left the car at the corner and walked up the street, laden with a basket, a bouquet, and some magazines, Velma was too happy to notice the dirt and noise of the street.

They unlocked the door and entered the sitting-room. Mrs. Lee removed her hat and handed it to Velma.

"Please put it away, dear."

Velma walked into the sleeping-room that she shared with her mother, a hat in each hand. Just inside the door she paused and cried:

"Mother! Why, mother! See!"

Mrs. Lee came forward, a smile upon her face. She did not seem in the least surprised to see that a pretty light-colored dressing-table had been added to the furniture of the room.

"Where did it come from, mother?" Velma asked, her brown eyes beginning to dance.

"It is a birthday gift from your friend, Signor Malchi. He has kept it hidden away from you while redressing and varnishing it, and brought it in here while we were gone."

"How kind he is! It is—oh, it is nicer than nice! I must go and thank the good Signor."

"He went down the street as we came up the steps. However, you will have an opportunity to thank him, as I have invited him to take tea with us."

Velma walked close up to the table. It was not large, and beneath the polished top were two drawers. The wood was very light, firm-grained, and glistened in the dim light of the room. Over the table was suspended a mirror, the supports and frame being of the same light wood.

"O mother, it is so sweet! I can never thank the dear old man enough."

"I am glad you appreciate his kindness. Now I am going to leave you to get acquainted with your treasure, for Mrs. Clement's carriage is at the door."

Mrs. Lee was only just out of the room when a voice said ·

"I am so glad I am yours, Velma! We shall be very happy together. Why child, do not look so startled. I am Birch, one of your furniture people."

"Oh, good, good!" and Velma went dancing round the room. "My gift will be dearer than ever to me because it was once a tree. I'll sit down here in the little rocker, where I can lay my hand upon you, and you shall tell me all of your dear story."

"Well, to begin in the proper way, I am *Betula Papyrifera*. That last name means paper, and so I am called Paper Birch or White Birch. Then I have a cousin who differs from me in some respects, and many persons insist that he alone has a right to the title White Birch. There is a reason for the name Paper, and I like to be called Paper Birch best. I will tell you the reason when I come to that part of my story. Personally, I am a native of the United States, although the Birches are well known in the Old World. I have several cousins, and we have many common points of resemblance."

"You look alike, as we say of real people," Velma suggested with a happy little smile.

"Yes, in a general way. Many of us have

drooping branches, and on all birch trees the branches are very slender. Some one has said that they are 'so slender that they scarcely cast a shadow.' Our leaves are finely-cut, notched, and taper to a point. Then our bark deserves special mention. On many of the trees it is very light-colored, a sort of silvery-white. Some trees have the bark marked horizontally with dots and lines."

"You must be pretty trees."

"Nearly all people think so. Our blossoms are curious. In the early spring-time our branches are tipped with long, drooping, yellow, tail-like catkins. They come from bracts which appear on the trees in autumn. The pollen comes from these catkins. The pistillate flowers, which are somewhat like tiny cones, have two curving arms that catch the pollen. The cones grow slowly and mature on the trees. In the late autumn the winds carry them away into the depths of the woods where many of them spring up the next year and, in time, become birch trees."

"How wonderful, how very wonderful it all is!"

"Indeed, I think you may well say that. You recall what I said about the name Paper

Birch, do you not? Well, that species often has its outer bark removed in thin layers. These can be written upon. The Indians used to fashion various vessels from the bark, even making canoes of it. These were made upon a frame and coated with a resinous substance. Many ornamental articles are still made from birch bark."

"Has it been long since you left your woodland home and became a dressing-table?"

"Only about twenty years. My first mistress was a sweet-faced young maiden, and I occupied one corner of a pleasant room in a country home. From the window near I could look across undulating fields and away to the sunny hilltops."

"Your life must have been a happy one."

"I was happy there, but the sunshine has been tempered by clouds. After a few years my mistress married, and the old home was broken up, the furniture being sold. I was brought to the city where I became the property of a middle-aged woman. She was silly and vain, spending much time in trying to appear younger than she really was. It made me sad to think that I had no higher use in life than to minister to her vanity. But now,

Velma, I am sure you will help me to lead a better life."

Velma looked grave.

"We will help each other," she said earnestly.

"Will you pardon me if I go back to myself?" Birch asked. "There are a great many kinds of birch trees, some of which have marked peculiarities. Black, Yellow, Sweet, Dwarf—these are a few of the names which explain themselves. While I do not mean to boast, yet I must tell you that some pretty things have been said about us. Lowell noticed us, but to him we seemed somewhat timid. He says, 'The birch, most shy and ladylike of trees.'"

"That was a nice thing for him to say."

"Irving is not so complimentary. On account of the slenderness of our branches, they used often to be taken for whips. Indeed, the term 'birch' came to mean a rod of correction for an unruly child. In 'The Sketch Book,' Irving speaks of a school vacation as 'six weeks' emancipation from the abhorred thraldom of book, birch, and pedagogue.'"

The little girl laughed merrily.

"Teachers use a ruler now, and we do not

know from what tree it comes. I am sure more sweet things have been said about you; you deserve them."

"Thank you, little mistress. I must tell you how dear I was to our great Longfellow. In 'The Song of Hiawatha,' there are many references to me. 'Cheemaun' was the Indian name for a birch canoe, and you remember how I helped the brave youth in his canoe building. It was to me he turned first, crying:

"'Give me of your bark, O Birch-Tree!
Of your yellow bark, O Birch-Tree!
Growing by the rushing river,
Tall and stately in the valley!
I, a light canoe will build me,
Build a swift Cheemaun for sailing.

* * * * *

Lay aside your cloak, O Birch-Tree!
Lay aside your white-skin wrapper.'"

"And you did not refuse his request, did you?"

"'The tree with all its branches
Rustled in the breeze of morning,
Saying, with a sigh of patience,
Take my cloak, O Hiawatha!'"

"Was that all that Longfellow said about you?"

"No, no. He told how the canoe, when com-

pleted, had 'all the lightness of the birch-tree.' Again he says,

> "'From the tassels of the birch-trees
> Soft the Spirit of Sleep descended;'

and before that he told how the child Hiawatha, in a moment of excitement, 'like the birch-leaf palpitated.' Hark, that is your mother calling you. Run along, for you and I shall have plenty of time to visit."

CHAPTER XI

SIGNOR MALCHI'S VISITOR AND THE ROSEWOOD BOX

One sunny morning, Velma was playing on the balcony. A slight breeze stirred the leaves of the vines and brought a breath of cool air to the little girl's face. She had her doll in her arms and was rocking back and forth, singing a soft lullaby.

Signor Malchi was at work just inside the door. He, too, was singing, or rather humming, a melody he had learned years before when, a happy, barefooted boy, he had worked in the vineyards of his beloved Italy.

Suddenly the outside door of the room opened, and a high-pitched voice called:

"Are these the rooms of Mr. Malchi, the Italian? And is he at home?"

"I am Malchi, the Italian, sir, at your service," was the Signor's reply. He went forward to meet the newcomer, bowing with the courtly grace that always pleased Velma and heightened her respect for him.

She looked at the stranger. He was a middle-

aged man and stooped as he walked. His face was dark, the lower part of it being covered with a well-trimmed beard, while the upper part was crossed and recrossed with a network of fine wrinkles. In his arms he carried a large package.

Velma found nothing of special interest about the man, so she again turned her attention to the doll lying in her arms. The lullaby was not resumed, however, as the child thoughtfully remembered that her singing might annoy the gentlemen who were talking.

Only a few minutes had passed when they came out upon the balcony. The wrappings had been removed from the package, and its contents—a wooden box a foot and a half square—was in Signor Malchi's hands. It was in order to see this more clearly that he had carried it to the balcony.

"No, no, little girl, you do not need to go," the Italian took time to say to Velma before he again turned to the stranger.

"You wish it cleaned and the lock repaired?"

"Yes. Put it in good shape. There's a little drawer within that needs mending. I prize it most highly, my good fellow."

"Ah, it is old, and it may be the heirloom of your family."

The stranger nodded.

"You are right. My great-grandfather owned it, and it was my grandfather who brought it to this country from England seventy years ago. Valuable papers used to be kept in it, but it is too small for mine. The safe in my counting-room will barely hold them."

Velma wondered if that was what her mother called boasting, but she was interested in the box and glad when the man went on.

"So I am going to have it cleaned up to give to my daughter Katherine on her fourteenth birthday. Katherine cares a lot for the old family traditions. She can keep her trinkets in the box and later on her jewels, for she will have the Van Lyden jewels when she is old enough to wear them."

He went soon after that, lingering only to learn when he should call for the box. Signor Malchi accompanied him to the door. Thus Velma was left alone with the box, which had been placed on a table.

"Well, I am glad to be out of that musty old chest, where I've been packed away for a dozen years. What a dear place this is! I hope

my new mistress, Katherine Van Lyden, will be as sweet a girl as you are."

Velma blushed and moved a little nearer to the table.

"That is right. Look me over. It will seem like old times to have young fingers once more lift my lid."

The box was made from a fine, hard wood of a dark blackish-brown color. This was beautifully marked with wavy lines and streaks of a dark red. Within, the box was divided into several small compartments. The lid was attached by tiny hinges, and in it was a large space apparently designed as a receptacle for papers.

"May I ask your name?" Velma inquired politely.

"Ah, Mr. Van Lyden forgot to tell you that I am Rosewood of the genus *Dalbergia*. Now, there are several kinds of trees the wood of which is called rosewood. It may not add much to your knowledge to have me tell you that I am *Dalbergia Nigra*, but it may interest you to learn that I was named for Nicholas Dalberg, a Swedish botanist. While traveling in Brazil, he learned many facts about me that he made known to the people of Europe."

"Oh, you are from Brazil then! I shall be so glad to hear about that far-away, beautiful country."

"In one sense of the word, it is exceedingly beautiful, Velma. The heat and the moisture induce a rank growth of vegetation. Besides this, there are many trees, plants, flowers, animals, and birds that would seem strange to you. However, you must remember that scores of years have passed since I left my distant home."

"Do you suppose that there have been many changes there in all the years?"

"Perhaps not in the part that was my home. Forests still cover vast tracts of land there. I was a large tree with wide-spreading branches. My leaves were shining and grew in pinnate fashion with a terminal leaflet. My long life as a tree was a most happy and care-free one. I knew little of men, only occasionally seeing a band of savages marching through the forest."

Velma drew nearer.

"Were they real Indians?"

"They were, differing only slightly in appearance and mode of living from those of North America. But there came a day when I realized that my free, ideal life was forever ended. A gang of men, headed by a loud-voiced, tyran-

nical overseer, came to my home. One tree after another went down before the blows of their axes. All too soon, my turn came, and my proud length was stretched upon the earth."

Velma stooped and laid her pink cheek upon the box's lid.

"You must have felt very bad then."

"I did, little girl. I was not resigned, however; it was resentment and anger rather than sorrow that filled my heart. When I was being dragged over the ground by four great oxen, I thought my last day had come. I was mistaken; God still had work for me to do."

There was a moment's pause, broken by Velma.

"You were sent to some other country? I heard the gentleman who just went from here say that his grandfather brought you to America from England."

"I did go first to England. Before being shipped, I was taken to the city of Para. There my trunk was sawn into logs ten feet long, and each log was split through the middle."

"Why, what was that for?"

"To make sure that the log was sound at the heart. Rosewood is nearly always shipped in half logs. There was a long sea voyage before

we reached England. Vast quantities of rosewood are shipped to that country every year. There it is used principally for veneering. This box, though, is solid."

"You told me how you came by your long Latin name, but I am wondering about the one by which you are best known—Rosewood. Does it really mean anything about the beautiful flower that bears the same name?"

"Ah, I came near forgetting to tell you that, and it is one of the most pleasing parts of my story. While the trees are being cut, they yield a most agreeable perfume, said by many to greatly resemble that of the rose. Ha! ha! Velma, there is no use of your trying to find the perfume; mine vanished more than a hundred years ago."

Velma had leaned forward to smell the box. She laughed a little; then the sweet voice went on.

"It is only while the wood is fresh that it is fragrant. As soon as it is seasoned, the odor disappears. All rosewood trees do not grow in Brazil. The East Indies produce a cousin of mine the wood of which is quite valuable. It is a species of *Dalbergia*, but its popular name is Blackwood."

"Does that mean that the wood is dark-colored?"

"It does. The wood is nearly black, not possessing my own red shade. Then there is African Rosewood, but he is of another genus. It is the same with Australian Rosewood. Indeed, this last-named tree is an evergreen, its finely-cut leaves remaining on the tree all winter. Its wood is light-colored, being a shade of red. Doubtless it was this that gave the tree its name, as it is no relative of mine."

"What about your life since leaving your first home. Have you been happy?"

"At first I was not. The sawing, planing, and polishing frightened and hurt me. Then I was rebellious and ungrateful, forgetting the long years of perfect joy that had been mine. It was not until I was in my present form and began to be useful that I learned life's great lesson."

"What is that?"

"I am glad to tell you, dear, for I am sure it applies to girls as well as to furniture people. It is service. All my years of growth were to fit me to be of use in the world. I am ungrateful if I am not as happy in service as I was in the days when God's good care was fitting me for it."

Again Velma bent over the rosewood box.

"Thank you. I will remember, and I hope you will carry as sweet a message to your new mistress, Katherine Van Lyden."

The box was made from a fine, hard wood of a dark blackish-brown color.

"If you knew all the uses to which the Chinese and the East Indian puts me you would be surprised."

CHAPTER XII

THE BAMBOO CABINET

The long, hot summer was drawing to a close. Velma began to look forward to the opening of school. One afternoon she returned from a visit to Signor Malchi to find Cousin Edith with her mother. Both ladies were much excited, and it was some time before the little girl understood what it all meant.

It was such a delightful story when once it was told! All of Velma's books of fairy stories held nothing so delightful, at least not to the little maiden who listened with bated breath and with cheeks in which the color came and went.

Velma and her mother were going to the country to live. At first that knowledge was enough for the child. However, after a few minutes had passed, and she had been assured that there was no mistake, she sat down to listen to her cousin's account of the matter.

Cousin Edith had a friend who lived on a beautiful estate six miles out of the city. The lady was not well and was absent from home

much of the time. She wanted some competent woman to oversee the work of the house and to do fine sewing.

Velma's mother was offered a good salary if she would go to Fairlawn and do this work. There was a tiny cottage on the grounds where mother and daughter could live, and there was an excellent school within a ten-minutes' walk of the cottage.

"You are to have all the milk, fresh eggs, vegetables, fruits, and flowers that you wish," Cousin Edith went on, smiling in sympathy with the joy mirrored in Velma's eyes. "Then there are fields and woods, besides a dear little brook which crosses the grounds."

You fortunate lads and lassies who have grown up among the beauties of nature cannot fully comprehend the delight which filled Velma's heart. She was to see and hear the birds, to watch the fruit ripen, and to revel in the gladness of the autumnal days. All the rest of the afternoon she could do nothing but talk of their new country home. She went in early the next morning once more to tell Signor Malchi about it.

"It is not as if we were going far away from you, dear Signor," she said. "I shall come to

see you, and you must often take the car and come out to Fairlawn."

The old Italian promised to do that. He knew he would greatly miss his friends, but he was too unselfish to do otherwise than rejoice in their good fortune. Before the visit was ended, the entrance of a customer interrupted it. Velma started to go out upon the balcony, but stopped to look at a curious cabinet which stood just below a window.

It was a quaint piece of furniture, being formed of small, smooth rods. There were two shelves upon one side and four upon the other, thus making the right-hand part much higher than the left. The rods were light-colored and slender but seemed strong.

"Yes, I am one of the furniture people," a voice said as if in reply to the little girl's unasked question. "I am *Bambusa* or Bamboo. While Bamboos grow in all parts of southeastern Asia and in Central America, I myself am a native of China. Indeed, I am the national plant of that empire."

"I shall be very glad to hear about China," Velma cried. "It may seem strange to you, but I never knew there was a bamboo tree."

"Tree! A bamboo tree! Well, that is a good

joke," and Bamboo laughed until Velma's face grew red with excitement and embarrassment.

"Pardon me," he said at last. "I am sure when you understand you will laugh too. Now Velma, you have learned to look upon all the furniture people as being trees, but I am really a grass."

"A—a—what?"

"A grass. You are looking at the rods and thinking that they are round instead of flat and much larger than any grass ever grows. Yet these are small in proportion to the size I sometimes attain. These that you are calling rods are stalks of grass."

Velma sat down upon the floor close to the cabinet.

"Please, please explain. I don't understand a single thing about it."

"While I am a grass, Velma, I grow to the proportions of a tree. Each one of my root stalks sends up from ten to one hundred woody, fast-growing stems. These grow straight up and sometimes reach a height of eighty feet."

"Eighty feet! Grass eighty feet tall!"

"If that surprises you, what do you think of this? These tall stalks are sometimes fifteen or eighteen inches in diameter. The stems are

jointed and nearly hollow, containing only a light, spongy pith. At the joints, which are called nodes, they are divided by a strong growth."

"Does it take you years and years to grow to be so tall?"

"Oh, no, child, we grow very rapidly. Each stalk has long, narrow, pointed leaves. These grow at the top and give the stalk the appearance of a plume, especially when they gently wave and sway in the wind. A single tuft of this grass will develop, in time, into a grove."

"Furniture made of grass! It does seem so funny that I cannot get over it."

"But that is not all that I am good for, little girl. If you knew all the uses to which the Chinese and the East Indian puts me you would be surprised."

Velma bent nearer, her face aglow.

"Please tell me all about them, Bamboo. I do so love to be surprised."

"To tell you all about them would take too long," Bamboo said with a merry, tinkling little laugh. "However, I will mention a few. I think I told you that at my joints there were little walls dividing my hollow tubes. These poles, or culms, as they are called, are sawed off

a little way on each side of this joint, making a sort of hollow dish after it is cut through the middle. This takes the place of a cup or, if the stalk is big enough, of a bucket."

"That's another thing to remember. You not only make furniture, but also dishes."

"Yes, and they are durable ones. When the Chinese builds his home he makes the framework for it of my tapering culms. With my leaves, he thatches the roof and often the sides. From my finely-shredded splints he makes window lattices and door screens."

"Why, he could not get along without you."

"It would be most difficult for him to do so. His home done, he makes furniture for it from my culms. Cabinets, tables, chairs, beds, couches —I furnish the material for all of these. With my shavings, mattresses and pillows are stuffed. Brooms are made from me, and my fibres are woven into clothing. The Chinese even cooks and eats my tender young shoots, using them as you do asparagus."

"I should think you would all be used up."

"There is always an abundance of us. I must tell you of a few more strange uses to

which we are put. In the Chinese system of irrigation, my hollow stems are used for water pipes, and bamboo bridges are common in that country. Baskets are woven from my splints, and they are also twisted into cables and plaited into awnings. A curious use of my leaves is the making of a 'rain-coat.' The leaves are pinned together so that the points overlap. The garment is swung over the shoulders and really sheds the rain."

"I remember my teacher's saying that China is a very old country. Did the people there know about you long ago?"

"Very, very long ago, Velma. It is recorded that, in the sixth century, my poles were used much the same as now. One story is that in that century the eggs of the silk worm were smuggled from China to Constantinople by being hidden in hollow bamboo culms."

Just then Signor Malchi joined Velma. She lifted a sparkling face to him.

"Is it not wonderful? I have been listening to the loveliest story from Bamboo. He is one of the furniture people, and, Signor Malchi, he is a grass."

The old Italian laughed and laid one hand tenderly on Velma's dark head.

"All these things are indeed wonderful, my dear little friend. In the new home you will find many, oh! so many, things to wonder about, for the earth is full of the mysteries of the good God's creation."

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